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# THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



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## THE NESTING OF THE SPOTTED OWL

By DONALD R. DICKEY

WITH SEVEN PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

WE HAD BEEN prospecting for a rumored condor ledge high in the coast mountains of Ventura County, California, and had come at night to a little valley where horse feed grew close to a clear, cold spring. It was an ideal camp site, and we left it with real regret as the early sun first began to creep down the western wall of the canyon on the memorable morning of May 15, 1913. In the bottoms it was still cold and damp, but as we climbed we slowly left behind the chill of the dark, sweet-smelling bays and the shade of the alder fringe along the creek, and came out into the open and warmth of the pines.

The saddle of the range which we were crossing was, roughly speaking, five thousand feet above the sea, so there was much to interest an eye and ear trained in the lowlands: here a fleshy crimson snow-plant, there a blue-fronted jay, so much the superior of our crestless, nest-robbing sneak of the lower live-oak valleys; or, perhaps, a slender-billed nuthatch "yanking" among the scattered oaks, or a friendly Bailey chickadee.

Once again the trail led into the shadow. This time at the foot of a high, overhanging cliff of red conglomerate, weathered out into fantastic castellated shapes. The pack horse was leading like a lamb for once in his aggravating career, so with leg flung across the saddle horn I had nothing to do but swing with the stride of old "Powhatan", and let my eyes wander eagerly over cliff face and tree.

Suddenly, in the black mouth of a pot-hole high on the rock wall, I caught a glimpse of a large round head. Almost instantly the bird shrank back into the dark interior, but the glimpse had satisfied me that I had seen my first Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis occidentalis*)! Man may voluntarily have come to the ground with greater speed than mine in that instant, but I doubt it. The

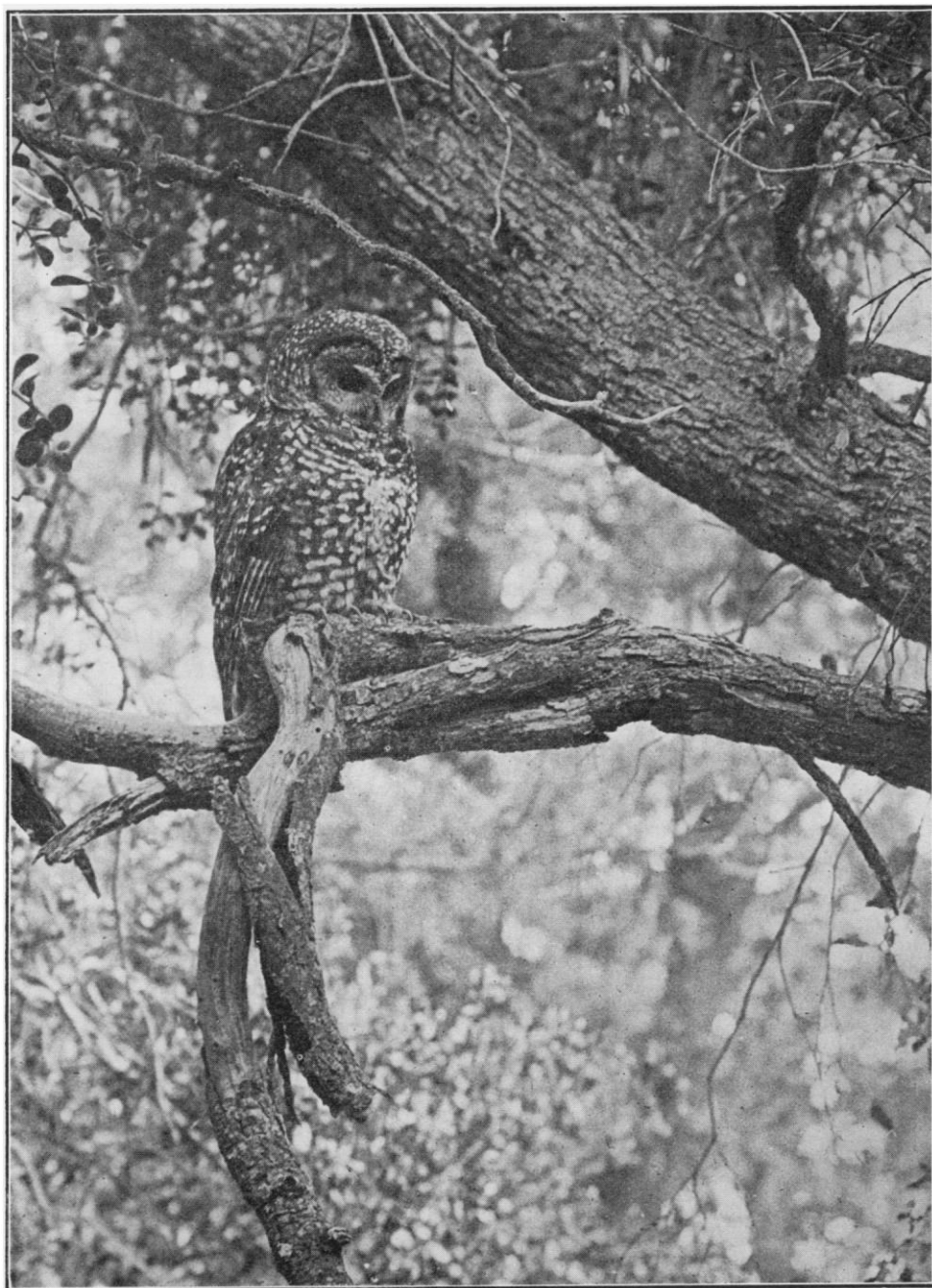


Fig. 55. AN ADULT SPOTTED OWL, *Strix occidentalis*, PEERED AT US FROM A CLOSE PERCH IN AN OAK.

hole, however, was sixty-five feet from the ground, nothing more was to be seen of the bird, and obviously nothing more was to be done without plenty of rope. So with many a backward glance we set out for the long ride back to civilization. To cap the climax of the day, we had hardly gone half a mile before we spied a condor circling low with evident interest in a white-marked ledge. Surely this was a day of days!

But the condors were destined to disappoint our photographic hopes. When we reached the spot again, after a slow-passing two weeks' delay, we found the birds still circling about the cliff, but a stiff climb showed the nesting ledge to be untenanted that year. For some reason they had not gone to



Fig. 56. SWINGING FROM THE FIR FIFTY FEET ABOVE THE GROUND.

housekeeping, although clinging tenaciously to the vicinity of their former nesting site. It was obviously their home even in the legal phrase, for it was "the place to which they returned for rest and recreation." But in the absence of egg or young they were rather shy for camera stalking. Nor could they be lured within range of a blind, even by the sacrifice of an antiquated equine offering. Poor "Ted",—a failure even in death!

The owls, however, behaved better. For, as Mr. Adriaan van Rossem, Mr. Philip Pierpont and the writer rode up to their home on May 31st, the old bird was sitting in plain sight on the edge of the nest hole with two well-grown

youngsters beside her. The round head and boldly spotted markings of the adult were plainly visible: we were looking on Spotted Owls at home! Small wonder that Van and I did something of a dance of triumph. To our astonishment the old bird did not seem to be disturbed in the least by our performance although we were directly below her. She merely peered down upon us, giving us splendid views of her plumage. Finally we left her to herself while we went on to pitch camp and look up the small birds a bit. The forms were characteristic of the altitude. The full, descending call of the olive-sided flycatcher set the key note, reminding us that the lowlands were left behind. California purple finches were singing in considerable numbers from the taller trees, western tanagers made flashes of color, and in the open places calliope hummers darted about. A courting male was taken by Mr. van Rossem. Every thick-foliaged oak had its black-throated gray warblers and, in an inaccessible crevice of the cliff itself, hundreds of white-throated swifts were apparently nesting. Twice a golden eagle sailed over us high in the air.

Next morning we reached the owl's nest early. To the best of my knowledge there had been but three previous authentic nesting records and astonishingly few records even of the birds themselves since the type was taken near old Fort Tejon in the early days of western ornithology. Bear with me, therefore, if I set down their actions and calls in perhaps too great detail.

A tall fir tree grew close in front of the cliff opposite the nest, and over a limb of this, as a preliminary to camera work, we tried to toss a weighted line. To our astonishment the weight almost struck the old owl. She had been perching in the tree and so perfect was her blending that we had not noticed her at all. She merely flew to a nearby tree. Her tameness was becoming more and more apparent. About nine o'clock, in spite of the noise of arranging rope and tackle in the fir, she (I use the feminine by assumption) flew directly to the nest. Judging from her movements, and from the low, excited squeaking of the young, she fed them—apparently something carried to them in her throat. If this was the case, the young were soon satisfied, for they retired to the inner sanctum of the pot-hole until afternoon.

The adult also slept the day away, but remained outside and in plain sight from where we swung from a limb of the fir fifty feet or so above the ground. We made what negatives we wanted, and then waited until four o'clock when all the owls had a period of sudden activity. The young came to the edge and tried their wings, hopping and flapping to and fro in the exposed part of the nest hole. The old bird, which had remained oblivious to the bang of our Graflex shutter, finally aroused herself and crawled parrot-wise along a narrow ledge of the wall face. She soon settled herself again, however, and slept so soundly that only by frantically flapping a focusing cloth could I even get her to open her eyes for a portrait. As the light grew too weak for photographs we left her still asleep with her back to the setting sun, the easiest sort of a target for even a stone.

Next morning the old bird sat dozing in a small oak near the nest, and only twenty feet from the ground. Her protective coloration, noticeable at all times, was particularly so this morning as she sat in the oak. But whether she clung to the cliff, or sat close against the mottled fir trunk, or in the spotted light and shade of the oak foliage, her harmonization was startlingly complete. This morning she seemed so oblivious to my approach that I was encouraged to climb the oak where a limb gave standing room on a level with her. An insane idea it seemed, and yet she was so absolutely devoid of common sense



**Fig. 57. SPOTTED OWL: AS SHE SAT IN THE SPOTTED LIGHT AND SHADE OF THE OAK FOLIAGE HER HARMONIZATION WAS STARTLINGLY COMPLETE.**

and fear that I was able to strap on my climbers and thud up the straight trunk below her till my hand was actually within five feet of her. All she did was to peer at me wide-eyed and bob slowly from side to side. But this was too close even for her, and she sailed across to an adjoining tree. She certainly was the incarnation of trusting tameness or stupidity,—call it what you will.

The new perch made photography impossible, but as we sat watching her we were treated to a glimpse of her morning toilet.



Fig. 58. SPOTTED OWL: THE NEST WAS A POT-HOLE SIXTY-FIVE FEET ABOVE THE GROUND.

every conceivable position she shook her feathers into perfect place and carefully preened away every frayed feather tip. There was something ludicrous in her every action. Even in the midst of her toilet there were sudden periods when Morpheus seemed to overpower her and she would doze off, only to awake with a start a few moments later and continue the performance. Her movements were much more gentle than those of the horned owls. The lack of their ear tufts and yellow irides also gave her a far more agreeable expression, although I must confess that certain startled expressions,—when one did succeed in startling her,—seemed unpleasantly lynx-like. When she moved along a limb her every movement suggested a parrot, really a striking resemblance.

The next thing was to reach the nest in order to photograph the young, and here our troubles began. It was a good example of the difficulties of judg-

ing distances in a big country. We guessed the cliff as one hundred and fifty feet high and a block of stone on its brim as perhaps twenty feet square. The latter turned out to be as big as a two-story house, while the end of our two hundred foot rope writhed sickeningly seventy feet above the ground when we lowered it from the brim. It did not even reach the nest. A tree that we dropped against the base of the cliff, after much perspiring axe work, also fell short. A ledge just below the nest proved unnegotiable even for the goat of the party,—who shall be nameless. All this meant one thing: more rope and another long round trip.

Along toward four o'clock the young again grew active according to their daily custom, and as they appeared the adult flew to the nest from the perch where she had slept all day. As she alit she noticed the tackle dangling just above the nest and immediately circled back to the fir, and began uttering repeatedly a low, indrawn whistle, "Whee e e?" with a sharp rising inflection. If this was intended as an alarm note it had no effect on the young. They remained on the edge of the nest and only increased the bobbing interest they took in the rope above their heads. Soon came the deep, "Whoo, whoo, who, who" of the other parent from far up the mountain. He was answered by the supposed female and a moment later he, too, flew down into a tree near the nest. As we rode away they sat in nearby trees, outlined against the piled-up cloud masses of a storm back in the range.

On the sixth of June we rode till midafternoon back up the zig-zags of the steep canyon trail among the yellow bells of the mariposa lily and the cream clusters of flowering yuccas. At last we reached the owl cliff and a ludicrous anticlimax. Picture the three grim cliff scalers with their five hundred feet of rope riding up and finding the owls not on the ledge at all, but come to meet them! It was nearly as bad as that, for there, in an insignificant oak across the ravine, sat the two youngsters with their parent. All three were well within the reach of any six-year-old boy. They were distant a hundred yards or so from the nest and the hillside rose so steeply on that side that they were almost level with the nest although not over fifteen feet from the ground. That the young could have reached the spot unaided seems incredible, for although the primaries were well grown out, they were, with that exception, in the complete down, and were still weak. The alternative is that the old birds, continuing their distrust of the dangling rope, had deliberately moved them. Certain it is that they would not normally have left the nest perhaps for weeks.

As we climbed to the young in the oak the old bird displayed her first sign of vital interest, flying within touch of the intruding heads and peering at us from close perches among the branches. But her passes at us were not fearsome things. She never even snapped her bill. Silently she swooped near,

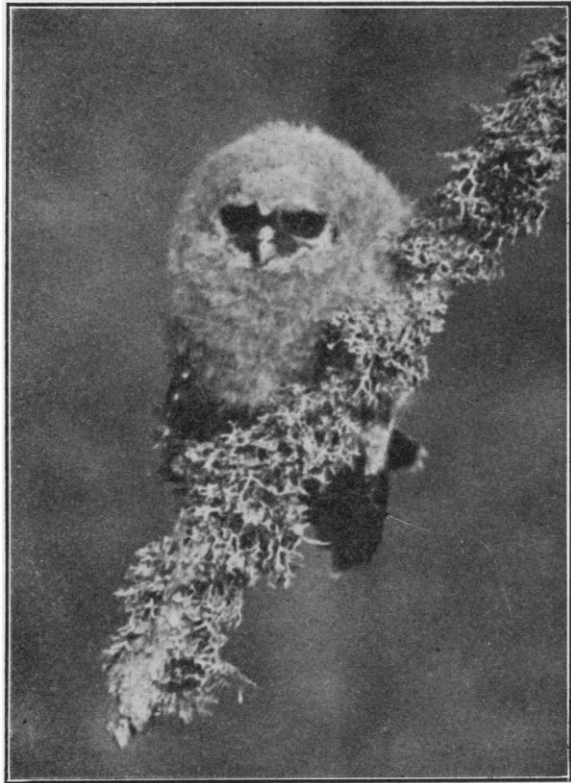


Fig. 59. YOUNG SPOTTED OWL STILL IN THE DOWN.



rather in an effort to see plainly, or decoy, than to harm or frighten us. And now continually came the low, musical, indrawn, whistled "Whee e e ?". The call would have come more suitably from the bill of some wee plaintive fly-catcher than from this great bird of prey. She also gave vent at this time to an utterly indescribable, turkey-like chuckle. Finally she hooted, but so low that it sounded like a dove, "Coo', coo', coo, coo." But the mate heard and his booming answer sounded from one hundred yards up the canyon. I was listening particularly for the canine quality in the tone and it undoubtedly has much of the full-throated explosive effect of a baying hound. It probably will not hold as an invariable rule, but it is at least interesting that every time either adult hooted, they used the indicated arrangement of two long and two short notes, "Whoo, whoo, who, who." We looked up this last deep-voiced bird where he sat close against the trunk of a pine and he proved to be as foolish as the supposed female. He did not even move when a pebble struck his foot.

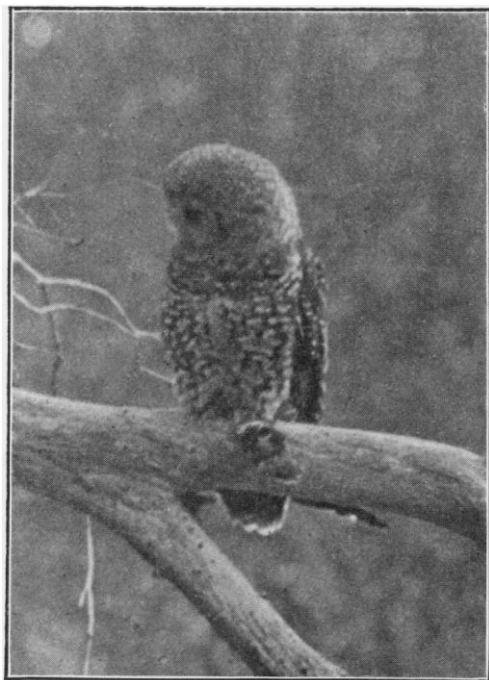


Fig. 60. SPOTTED OWL: SHE GAVE A LOW INDRAWN WHISTLE WITH A RISING INFLECTION.

The young were docile, downy little things of a soft grayish and buffy white. They used neither bill nor claw, and the direst threat of the larger bird was a slight parting of the bill as it shrank back from the touch of our hands. This larger bird we took to camp for the night as mascot of a happy party and as hostage from the parent owl. The other young was left in a tree.

We arrived next morning to find the old bird busily tearing at a fresh-killed brush rat. Under the tree were the plucked tail feathers and primaries of two jays, probably the work of the owls. Only one regurgitated pellet was found. That one contained the partial skull and leg bones of a mouse. By this time the light had grown stronger, and the

old bird had ceased to show any interest whatever in the young which we were busily photographing. Instead she went calmly off to sleep.

We had decided to examine the nest in spite of its desertion, so in the cool of the afternoon we fastened a block to the end of our dangling rope, rove the new rope through it and went up from the bottom with the greatest ease. The nest cave was quite good-sized when examined closely, extending up and back for three or four feet. The nest itself, placed near the entrance, was two and a half feet across, and in situation and construction might well have been a raven's nest. Possibly it was so originally. In any event it had evidently been used for years. The comparatively large sticks of its foundation had rotted down and the interstices gradually filled with bones and hair until

it had become the mere matted platform of today. Behind it was the space into which the young retired during the brightest hours.

In the nest were the remains of another freshly-killed *Neotoma*, the dried



Fig. 61. A WILDERNESS OF PINES AND CLOUDS.

skull of some *Peromyscus*, and one dried pellet containing mouse bones. Oddly enough, no fresh pellets were found either in or below the nest, so I was unable to gather enough pellets for a comprehensive diet analysis. Such

positive evidence as we have, points solely to the smaller rodents as their source of food supply. Unquestionably, they are an exceedingly beneficial raptor, though their rarity would, of course, impair their collective usefulness.

As I hung there, studying at first hand the nest of a Spotted Owl, there came a last evidence of the bird's mild stupidity. Suddenly the shadow of her broad, silent wings fell across me, and I instinctively cringed. While I still clung to the nesting ledge with one hand, and to her protesting young with the other, she swept in and alit within eighteen inches of my fingers. And yet, so little of menace was in her eye and pose, that I calmly left my bare hand within striking distance until we were ready to lower away. Surely the veriest dicky-bird of them all,—so despised of Mr. Dawson in a certain raptor eulogy,—would do more to avenge the supposed rape of her offspring than did this taloned bird of prey, sitting idly by without apparently the courage to protect its young by fight, or the common sense to protect herself by flight.

One of the young was left in the nest in the confident hope that it would be safely reared there as soon as our tackle should be removed. The other and larger bird was taken, and is now in my collection. It proved to be a male, and furnishes a good example of the bird in the juvenal down.

On our way out the next day, we were delighted to see the adult bird and her young sitting complacently side by side in the nest as we passed, the old bird content in the quiet possession of her home, the youngster still abob with undiminished curiosity. And thus we left them—to the undying disgust of the dyed-in-the-wool collector of the party—left them to their wilderness of pines and clouds, and wrinkled, fog-filled valleys, thousands of feet below.

*York Harbor, Maine, July 25, 1914.*

## HENRY W. MARSDEN

By LOUIS B. BISHOP

ON FEBRUARY 26, 1914, at Pacific Grove, California, after a short illness with pneumonia, there rested from his labors Henry Warden Marsden. Known personally to but comparatively few ornithologists and even by name to not very many men out of California, the last fifteen years of his life were devoted almost exclusively to collecting birds; and those of us who possess the results of his work have not only beautiful bird skins but a living memory of an earnest, loyal helper, who spared neither time nor effort that our collections might be enriched with what we needed for scientific study, and no more. For, like all truly interested in birds, he hated to take life needlessly. Writing me from Arizona some years ago he said of the Pyrrhuloxia: "They are too beautiful to kill"; and in his last letter from Pacific Grove, written only a few days before his death, I read: "I have skinned forty Cassin Auklets which I found dead along the shore. I don't know what I shall do with them, but I hated to let them spoil." And this conscientiousness followed him through all his work. His chief fear, frequently expressed to me in letters, was that he would send us more than we needed of any species.

Things of beauty, as I have said, his bird-skins were, and probably, all things considered, the finest ever made; they could only have been the product of one with both rare talent and love for his work. And both of these he had, as well as interest in other branches of ornithology, though he wrote but little.